

## **Stronger Asean will help region deal with global powers**

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A PEACEFUL and integrated South-east Asia is key to Singapore and the region dealing with global powers like China and India, said Foreign Minister George Yeo yesterday.

This is why Singapore is dedicated to building up an integrated Asean.

He was responding to a question at a conference on Singapore's future organised by the Institute of Policy Studies.

He had been asked if Singapore should look beyond Asean and devote more resources to the global community.

Mr Yeo responded: 'We are devoting considerable resources to Asean. In fact, it is the entire basis of our foreign policy, that we have a strong South-east Asia which can then interact effectively with our major partners...'

The alternative, he said, would be dreadful.

'If South-east Asia is divided, because of our strategic position, major powers are forced to intervene, interfere in our domestic politics.'

He noted, however, that as all members agreed on this point, the drafting of the Asean Charter was not as difficult as he expected.

Asean integration was also raised at an earlier session at the day-long conference.

In those discussions, Dr Yeo Lay Hwee of the Singapore Institute of International Affairs told delegates Asean must provide enough 'carrots' to encourage integration if it hopes to succeed in building an economic community.

This could involve what the European Union (EU) has done - setting up structural and cohesion funds that 'created a sense of solidarity', she said.

In the case of the EU, Europeans as a whole felt integration is a 'win-win' situation in which everyone benefits because 'losers were compensated in some ways' through these funds and other channels.

She said if Asean is to create a sense of community as the EU has done, it has to put in a lot of resources in the region in order to promote it.

'If you can't effectively prove to either the elites or the people that integration will bring more benefits than costs, then it will be a hard sell,' she said.

Those countries that are uncertain of the benefits of integration will then cling to what they currently have, rather than give them up.

At the same session, Dr Denis Hew of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies noted that Asean needs a higher level of economic integration if it is to succeed in creating an Asean economic community.

He added that Singapore could play a role in helping Asean integrate.

Indeed, it will be in Singapore's interest if integration is successful as it is well placed as 'a regional hub for a much more integrated Asean and a natural conduit leading Asean to China and India', he said.